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SUBJECT: DAWA INSIDER DISCUSSES SOUTH-CENTRAL IRAQ POLITICAL
DYNAMICS

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State Dept.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: In a May 29 meeting, PM Maliki's Personal Representative in the South-Central Region (and Babil Dawa Chair), Ali Jabur Hassun (Abu Ahmed al-Basri), said that:

- PM Maliki had obtained a pledge from Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani not to support a specific party in the provincial elections, from which Dawa believed it would benefit;
- ISCI wanted to delay or cancel the provincial elections, and Dawa was dissatisfied with ISCI's governance in the provinces;
- Dawa will try to build on PM Maliki's strong popular support to reach out to non-sectarian voters in the provincial election campaigns, with half of Dawa candidates for the Babil Provincial Council (PC) being non-party members;
- Dawa hoped to win as much as one-third of the Babil PC seats and that Abu Ahmed himself was under pressure from the PM to run as a candidate in Babil;
- Babil GEO (Governorate Election Office) Director Hussein abd Ali Khalaif was linked to the Sadrism Trend and should be removed;
- he would contact the OMS (Office of the Martyr Sadr) Director Sheik Saddiq to encourage him to open a dialogue with the PRT; and
- the release of key Sadrists, such as recently detained Sheik Sabbah, would promote political reconciliation. End Summary.

12. (C) Just back from one of his regular meetings with the PM in Baghdad, Babil Dawa Party Chair Ali Jabur Hassun (Abu Ahmed al-Basri) spent two hours with the PRT Leader discussing the political situation in the South-Central region, focusing mostly on Babil. He predicted that the provincial election will have a direct effect on the 2009 national parliamentary elections. He asserted that most of the opportunistic, incompetent and corrupt politicians had been exposed over the last three years and that ISCI stood the most to lose in the provincial vote. He praised U.S. willingness to step back and let IHEC run the election with UNAMI assistance. While the GEOs would have more independence than in 2005, he had doubts about Babil GEO Director Hussein, whom he accused of favoring of the Sadrism Trend. Abu Ahmed repeatedly stressed the need to remove Mr. Hussein, but leveled no specific complaints of misconduct. (Comment: This is the first allegation we have heard that Hussein is affiliated with the Sadrists and biased toward OMS. It is possible that Abu Ahmed thought that by levelling this accusation, he could get the US to seek the replacement of the GEO Director, opening the door for someone ready to cooperate with Dawa. End Comment)

13. (C) Abu Ahmed was very satisfied with the PM's meeting last weekend in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Sistani. He said that Sistani had pledged not to endorse any political party during

the provincial election campaign. (Note: Sistani subsequently issued a statement to this effect.) Abu Ahmed said Dawa believed it would be the principal beneficiary of Sistani's decision. Dawa planned to invest in publicizing this message to the Iraqi public "so that other political parties will not try to exploit Sistani," as was done in the 2005 COR elections, in which ISCI was seen as having Sistani support.

¶4. (C) Abu Ahmed described the Dawa strategy for the provincial elections as aimed at building on Maliki's popular support, claiming that Maliki's popularity had nearly doubled over the last two months to reach 70%, and that Maliki was viewed as a non-sectarian leader representing the country's interests, capable of restoring public order and not corrupt. These were the themes that Dawa would stress in the provincial elections. To give this meaning, Abu Ahmed said that 17 of 32 of Dawa's candidates for the Babil PC were non-party members. Although there are no Sunnis on the Dawa slate, he made clear that the goal was to have Dawa's candidates seen as non-partisan and competent. He said that he himself was under pressure from the Dawa national leadership, including the PM, to stand as a candidate for the PC. He was giving this consideration, since the next PC would have increased powers. Abu Ahmed added that Dawa's leaders at all levels are dissatisfied with ISCI's governing style. He accused ISCI of trying to marginalize Dawa, and said that in the provinces it controls, ISCI forces incompetent and corrupt persons into Director and Director General (DG) positions, placing loyalty above qualifications. He added that Governor Salim al-Muslmawi tries to micro-manage all provincial officials for his own gain. (Comment: This tracks with the remarks of many other Babil observers. End Comment.) Abu Ahmed was rather optimistic about Dawa's prospects in Babil, assessing that Dawa could win of one-third of the PC's 32 seats, which would certainly put Dawa in the driver's seat in Babil.

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¶5. (C) Turning to the issue of the Sadrist role in the upcoming elections, Abu Ahmed said the Government stood solidly behind PM Maliki's decision that Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) would have to disband as a militia and lay down its heavy weapons if OMS was to be able to participate as a party in the elections. He acknowledged that many OMS officials were nonetheless registering independent political entities that could run as OMS surrogates. He expressed his support for the PRT's efforts to reach out to the Sadrist Trend to establish a dialogue and urged the CF to release "moderate" Sadrist detainees to promote political reconciliation. He specifically named a recently detained Sadrist, Sheik Sabbah, as an example. The PRT Leader said that he would not seek Sheik Sabbah's release at this time, but that if a dialogue with the Sadrists advanced political reconciliation, the opportunities for detainee releases would grow.

¶6. (C) Abu Ahmed voiced suspicions that ISCI is seeking to "quash the provincial elections," or to at least delay them until early in 2009. He said ISCI fears losing control of several provinces in the south-central region. He predicted that ISCI would fail in this effort, because the public pressure is overwhelming.

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